

DECISION MEMO

Huckleberry Enhancement Project Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Mt. Baker and Darrington Ranger Districts Skagit County, WA

Background

Huckleberry is a common understory plant in the mountain hemlock series (LRMP III-25). It is an important foraging species for many wildlife species including grizzly bears and migratory birds. Historically, in Oregon and Washington, large fields of huckleberries were once maintained by repeated natural and Native American-induced fires, and in the absence of those fires, other plant species became dominant (USDA 2006). Roads constructed for fire prevention after 1910 made transportation to huckleberry patches feasible (USDA 2006). Clearcutting increases the abundance of seral species (including huckleberry) used for tribal ceremonial purposes (LRMP IV-104). In the more recent past, management under the NWFP has resulted in a reduction of clearcutting on NFS lands and in timber harvest in general. This reduction in timber harvest has led to conifer encroachment into huckleberry patches.

Purpose and Need

Huckleberries are an important food source for wildlife and a common product collected on the Forest. Conifers are encroaching into big-leaf huckleberry fields and shading out established shrubs. This reduces available fruit for both wildlife and human uses, and decreases habitat diversity on the Forest. There is a need for maintaining huckleberry fields and habitat diversity on the Forest. The purpose of this project is to increase huckleberry production on approximately 58.5 acres on the Mt. Baker and Darrington Ranger Districts.

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to remove small diameter conifers in existing huckleberry stands by thinning. This will reduce the live tree canopy cover to less than 30 percent in mountain hemlock and Pacific silver fir (all less than 15" dbh) stands across the project area. Treatments will occur in 5 stands, totaling 58.5 acres, in the mountain hemlock zone. All stands are 30 to 55 years of age. Increasing sunlight into existing huckleberry stands may result in greater fruit production. Actions will include two different treatment methods: 1) lop and scatter; and, 2) pile and burn.

A monitoring plan will be developed and implemented the first two years following treatments. Additional monitoring will occur during years 5, 10, 15 and 20. Data from monitoring may help determine which treatment types are more successful; provide information on regeneration of stands by area by prescription; and, answer the question "is it better to spend resources in areas that are currently retaining huckleberry or in areas of fast regeneration".

Project Location

This project is located in Skagit County, WA (Figure 1). The Iron Mountain sites lie approximately 4 miles southeast of Hamilton, WA in the Finney Block (Figure 2). The Tupso Ridge sites lie 10 miles southeast of Rockport, WA and 11 miles northeast of Darrington, WA (Figure 3). Table 1 provides a more concise description of each project site.

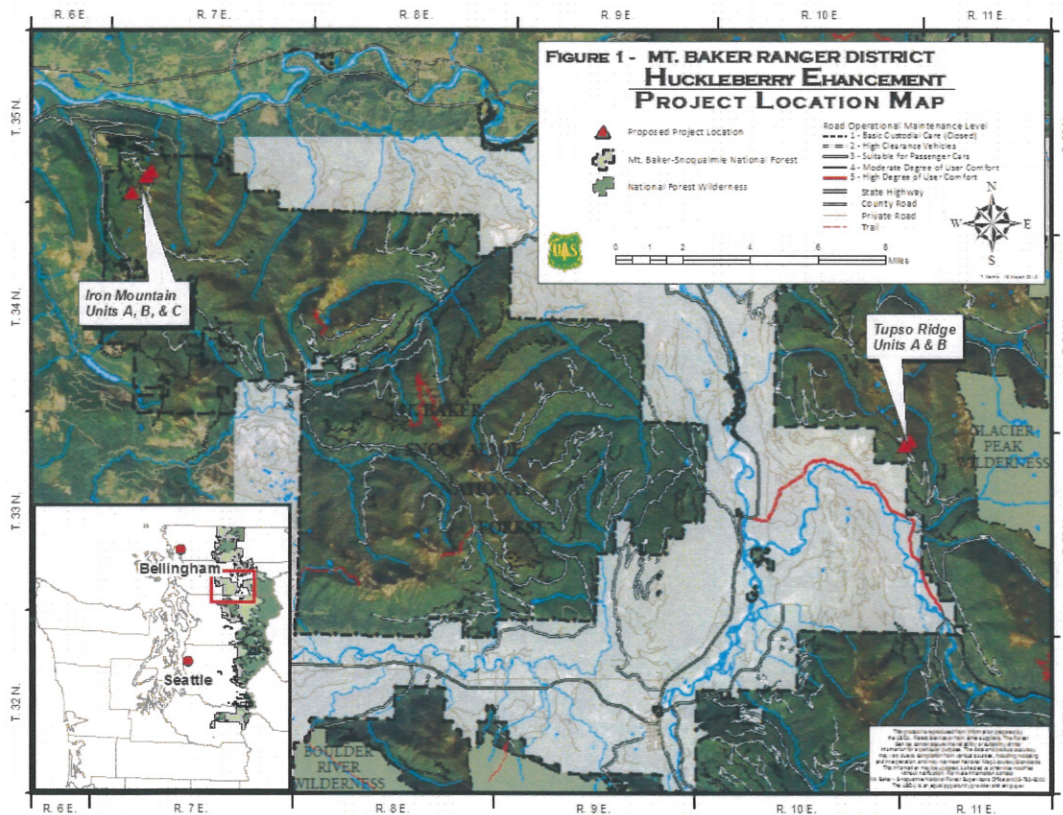


Figure 1. Location of Huckleberry Enhancement Projects on Mt. Baker and Darrington Ranger Districts

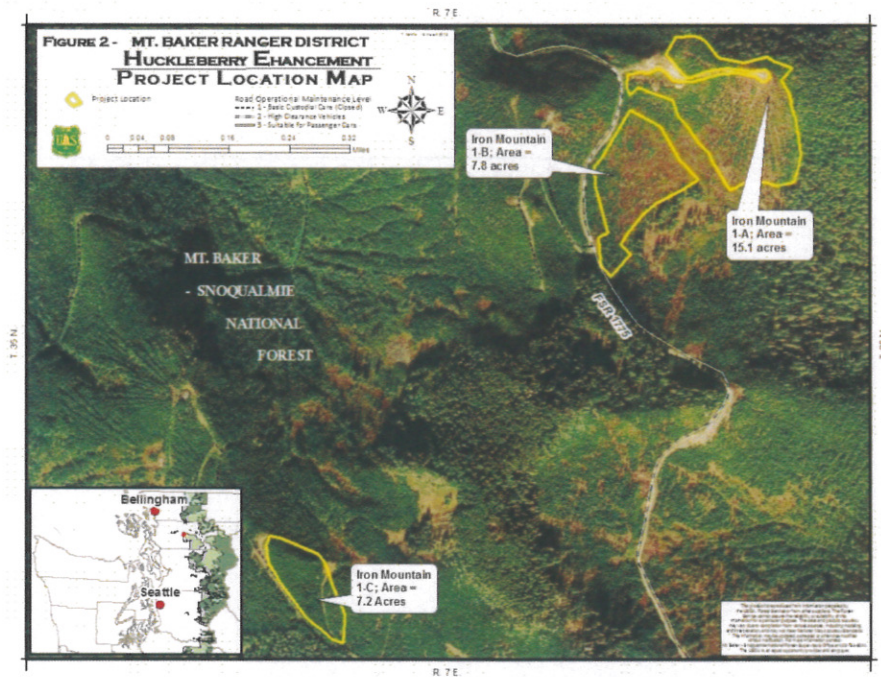


Figure 2 Location of Iron Mountain Project Areas on the Mt. Baker Ranger District

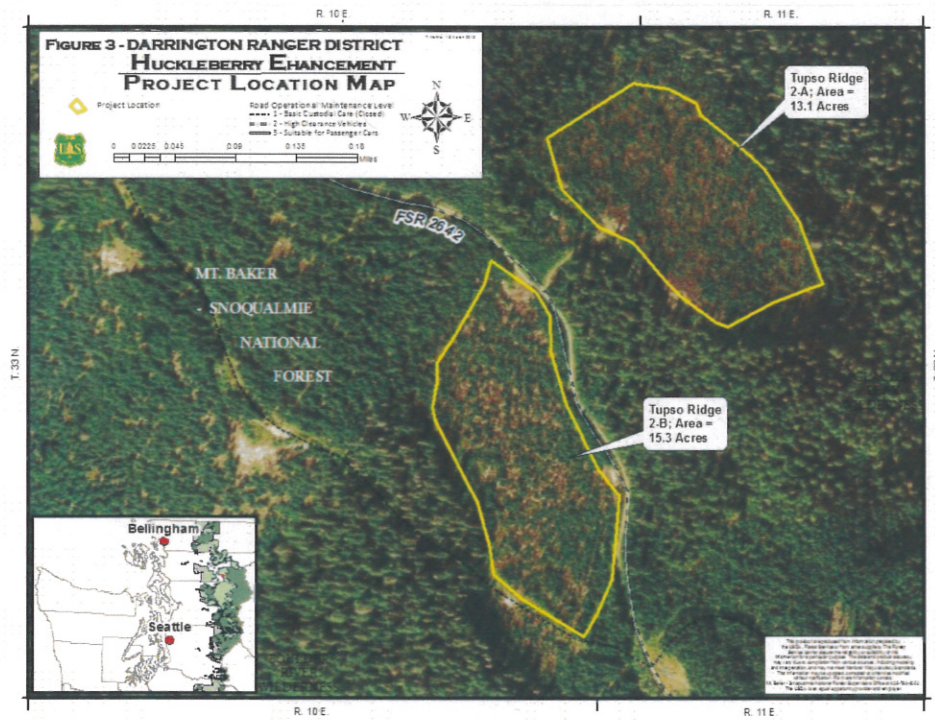


Figure 3 Location of Tupso Ridge Project Areas on the Darrington Ranger District

Table 1 Specific Descriptions of Project Locations on the Mt. Baker and Darrington Ranger Districts

Site Name	Unit	Elev Ft	Legal Land Description	Land Allocation	FSR Access	Stand Age	Plant Association Zone	Acres
Iron Mountain	A	4140	T35NR7ES29SW1/4	LSR-AMA	1775	1982	MHZ	15.1
Iron Mountain	B	4080	T35NR7ES32NW1/4	LSR-AMA	1775	1982	MHZ	7.8
Iron Mountain	C	4280	T35NR7ES31	LSR-AMA	1775-018	1974	MHZ	7.2
Tupso Ridge	A	4150	T33NR11ES6NW1/4	1BLSR	2642	1988	MHZ	13.1
Tupso Ridge	B	4125	T33NR10ES1E	19& 15LSR	2642	1988	PSFZ	15.3
Total								58.5

Decision

It is my decision to implement the project as described above.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA), because the project falls within 36 CFR 220.6(e)6: *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.*; and because there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action that may result in significant individual or cumulative environmental effects. This is discussed further in the section “Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Action from Additional Documentation” below.

Standard Management Practices and Mitigation Measures

The following project standard management practices and mitigation measures are integral components of this decision. They are put in place to minimize potential environmental impacts of the project and to improve existing conditions. The measures listed below are to be implemented as part of the activities approved in this project.

Heritage

- If previously unidentified resources are discovered during project implementation, or if identified resources are affected in an unanticipated way, the activity will be stopped in the area and a reasonable effort made to secure and protect the resource. The Forest Heritage Specialist will be notified, and the Forest will fulfill its responsibilities in accordance with the Programmatic Agreement and other applicable regulations (Stipulation III.C.). If human remains or cultural items specified in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) are located, regulations (43 CFR 10) implementing NAGPRA will be followed.

Botany

- Actions conducted or authorized by the Forest Service that will operate outside the limits of the existing road prism require the cleaning of all heavy equipment prior to entering National Forest system lands.

- Conduct pre-implementation treatment of noxious weeds (e.g., orange hawkweed).

Aquatics

If surface water is observed during implementation, erosion control methods (e.g., straw bales, silt fencing) shall be used to prevent silt-laden water from entering the stream.

If weather conditions during project operations result in transport sediment to any flowing waters with a high potential to deliver to salmonid habitats, cease operations until the weather conditions improve, unless delaying operations will create the risk of adverse resource impacts. Coordination with Forest Service aquatic specialists shall be part of this decision process.

Any trees to be felled within reach of a stream shall be felled toward the stream and left in place.

Have hazardous spill clean-up materials and trained operators on site.

Any machinery maintenance involving potential contaminants (fuel, oil, hydraulic fluid, etc.) will occur at an approved site or outside the Riparian Reserve.

Prior to starting work each day, check all machinery for leaks (fuel, oil, hydraulic fluid, etc.) and make all necessary repairs before entering a Riparian Reserve.

Visual Quality

- Maintain visual quality level of retention for Tupso Ridge site 2A – human activities not visible to the casual forest visitor.

Wildlife

- Manage trash daily to avoid attracting corvids or bears (e.g., use bear proof containers or existing trash collection devices). No trash collection devices are provided on site.
- Avoid removal or damage to large diameter trees (e.g., >40 inches diameter at breast height)

Rationale for the Decision

This decision meets the purpose and need of the project of granting access to private property in accordance with Federal rules, regulations and standards.

Scoping for this project did not identify any significant issues.

Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Action from Additional Documentation

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA) when they are within one of the categories identified in 36 CFR 220.6 and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

This action fits under category 36 CFR 220.6(e)20: *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.* This category of action is applicable as removing small diameter conifers improves growing conditions for huckleberry plants providing increased forage opportunity for wildlife and collection of forest products for human use.

There are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action that may result in significant individual or cumulative environmental effects. I have considered the results of scoping and the resource conditions and in my determination have concluded that the proposed action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment.

Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

Consistent with 36 CFR 218.6 (a), I find there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. My determination is based on Forest Service staff review and analysis, and documents in the Project Record. I took into account the following resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for federal listing, or Forest Service sensitive species

In accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, *Biological assessments and evaluations for threatened and endangered plants, fish, and wildlife and designated critical habitat were completed in August 2015. These assessments concluded that this project would result in a **No Effect** for Coastal/Puget Sound bull trout, Puget Sound chinook, Puget Sound steelhead; a **No Effect** for designated critical habitat for Coastal/Puget Sound bull trout, Puget Sound, Chinook salmon, Puget Sound steelhead; would **Not Adversely Affect** Chinook essential fish habitat, Coho salmon essential fish habitat, Puget Sound pink salmon essential fish habitat.*

Following analysis it was determined this project would have **No Effect** on marbled murrelet, northern spotted owl, grizzly bear, gray wolf, northern spotted owl designated critical habitat or marbled murrelet designated critical habitat.

2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

*There would be **no impact** to flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds as no bodies of water will be entered.*

3. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, or national recreation areas

This project is not located in wilderness, a wilderness study area, or national recreation area. The Glacier Peak Wilderness lies two miles east of the Tupso Ridge Site A. All sites are greater than one mile from the Skagit Wild and Scenic River. There would be **no impact** to any congressionally designated areas by implementing this action.

4. Inventoried Roadless areas or potential wilderness area

Although Inventoried Roadless areas (IRAs) are within 1/10th of a mile of the project, no new roads will be built. There will be **no impact** inventoried roadless areas.

5. Research Natural Areas (RNAs)

There are no Research Natural Areas within or near the Project Area.

6. American Indians religious or cultural sites

The federal government has trust responsibilities to Tribes under a government-to-government relationship to ensure that the Tribes' reserved treaty rights are protected. Consultation with Tribes helps ensure that these trust responsibilities are met. *The Forest initiated consultation with potentially affected Tribes on March 7, 2016 and no effects were identified.*

7. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas

This project meets conditions under Appendix A and is excluded from case by case review.

Tribal Consultation

The Proposed Action was provided to the Sauk-Suiattle, Upper Skagit, Tulalip, Stillaguamish, Samish, Lummi, Nooksack and Swinomish Tribes for review and comment during government-to-government consultation and scoping in March 2016. No comments were received for this project by any of the aforementioned tribes.

Public Involvement

The Huckleberry Enhancement Project has been listed in the Forest's *Schedule of Proposed Actions* since March 2016. A bulletin announcing the availability of a scoping letter and maps that summarized the proposal and invited comments were sent via U.S. mail or e-mail to 259 organizations, agencies, and individuals in March 2015. There were no comments received on this project.

Forest Plan Consistency

This project is consistent with the following Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, 1990) objectives for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, as amended:

- Wildlife objective of habitat improvement designed to improve the quantity, quality, or arrangement of wildlife habitat (1990 Forest Plan p. 4-46).
- Maintaining native and desirable non-native plant and animal species and communities. Provide for all seral stages of terrestrial and aquatic plant associations in a distribution and abundance to maintain the productivity of these biological communities (1990 Forest Plan p. 4-122).
- Assure the availability of sites and areas for religious and ceremonial use by American Indian tribes within the planning area (1990 Forest Plan p. 4-97).
- Maintain and/or enhance habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species habitat in accordance with Recovery Plans (1990 Forest Plan p. 4-3)

Under the Forest Plan, as amended, the Iron Mountain project area falls within the Finney Adaptive Management Area. The Tupso Ridge project area falls within the project falls within late successional reserves. However, the Tupso Ridge area is not suitable northern spotted owl or marbled murrelet habitat. Implementation of this project is consistent with the Forest Plan, as amended.

Findings Required by Laws and Regulations

National Forest Management Act. The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie Forest Plan, as amended, was developed and approved (1990) using the provisions of the 1982 planning rule. That rule has been updated and replaced by the 36 CFR 219 planning rule of 2012. As stated above, I have found that this project is consistent with the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie Forest Plan, as amended. The project meets the applicable Forest Plan management direction, including goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines in the regulations. Therefore, as provided by 36 CFR 219.15 (d), I find this decision is consistent with the requirements of the National Forest Management Act (USC 1604(i)) and it is implementing regulations (36 CFR 219, issued in 2012).

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA): The process for this analysis followed the regulations and direction outlined in 40 CFR parts 1500-1508, 36 CFR part 220, Forest Service Manual 1950, and Forest Service Handbook 1909.15. There has been opportunity for public involvement and tribal consultation during the course of the analysis. This decision memo summarizes and documents the environmental analysis conducted by the Forest Service. Given these factors, I find this decision fully complies with NEPA.

Endangered Species Act: The District Wildlife Biologist, Zone Fisheries Biologist, and the Zone Botanist analyzed the project with regard to the Endangered Species Act. Effects determinations are described in the “Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances” section of this document.

National Historic Preservation Act: As stated, the Project Record contains documentation of consultation with appropriate Tribes and interested persons. No Tribal concerns were raised regarding the identification and evaluation of, or effects to, historic or pre-historic properties. The action will not affect any archeological sites, or historic properties or areas. This project meets conditions under Appendix A and is excluded from case by case review. No historic properties would be adversely effected by the proposed activity. The project meets the terms of the 1997 Programmatic Agreement between the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, Washington State Historic Preservation Office, and Forest Service (Cultural Specialist Report in Project Record).

Migratory Bird Treaty Act: This project will modify 58.5 acres of existing habitat by reducing canopy cover of conifer tree species. This will provide opportunity for increased shrub and forb diversity and increased berry production. Ultimately this project will increase diversity, and forage and nesting opportunity for migratory birds.

Clean Water Act: This decision is consistent with the Clean Water Act (CWA) of 1972 and subsequent amendments, which makes it unlawful for any person to discharge any pollutant into waters of the United States, unless a permit is obtained under its’ provisions. Best management practices in project implementation will minimize or eliminate introduction of pollutants into surface waters.

Invasive Species Management: This decision is consistent with both Forest and Regional direction regarding invasive species management. The project is consistent with the U.S. Forest Service National Strategic Framework for Invasive Species Management and complies with management direction and prevention strategies. Best management practices and mitigation measures to prevent noxious weed introduction and spread are incorporated into this project (Refer to the “Standard Management Practices and Mitigation Measures” section above.).

Implementation and Appeal

This decision is not subject to administrative review pursuant to the 2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act and 2014 Farm Bill. Implementation of this decision will occur in the late fall and winter of 2016 and 2017.

Contact Person

For further information concerning this decision, please contact interdisciplinary team leader Shauna Hee at the Mt. Baker Ranger District, SR 20, Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284; phone (360) 854-2635; or email shee@fs.fed.us.

For ERIN ULOTH

ERIN ULOTH

District Ranger

Mt. Baker Ranger District

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

4-14-16

Date

Peter R. Forbes

Peter Forbes

District Ranger

Darrington Ranger District

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

4/18/16

Date

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